

# The English Leaflet

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## TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

AVE ATQUE VALE!

With this issue the twenty-fifth year of our series of *Leaflets* comes to a close. A glance backwards over the multitude of topics discussed suggests the comprehensiveness of our list and marks the emphasis that has at various times been placed upon the several phases of English teaching. Those who were directly responsible for the organization of our Association have many times received the plaudits of those who later enlisted in the work. And now once again we would here express our gratitude to our first Editor, Mr. George H. Browne, who gave the *Leaflet* its significant initial tone. In the midst of a life crowded with heavy duties, he carried the aegis for ten successful years and made us all his debtors. In the thoughts of each of us, he remains our honored Editor Emeritus.

Whilst it is upon the past that we lay our tribute of praise, it is the future with which our corps of earnest workers is most deeply concerned. We are in the midst of a highly energized era. Education in a quarter of a century has grown more and more professional, more and more exacting in its technical demands. All of us who are teachers in a true sense are students in an even truer sense. The problems are altering with the years. The shifting of the lines constantly dictates a new strategy. It is the duty of our Association to see that we fearlessly and intelligently meet these newer mandates. In furthering the success of this campaign each succeeding number of the *Leaflet* will try to be more than a mere gazette; it will try to be an interpreter.

## POETRY RE-EXAMINED

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## THE FIELD OF POETRY AND THE LANGUAGE OF POETRY

Saintsbury is quoted by Mr. T. S. Omond as adhering to the "great truth" that "in English, by the grace of God and the Muses, the poetry makes the rules, not the rules the poetry." The agreement of these two authorities, who do not always think alike, on this attitude towards rules and poetry confirms me in my opinion that poetry is too much alive to remain submissive within any fence that definition may try to build around it. The boundaries of its province are not fixed by law from without; poets will cross every line that is sharply drawn, and lovers of poetry will follow them where they go. The circumference of the charmed circle is a fringe, not a line.

And yet attempts at definition help to show us where the main area has lain. Where it may come to lie, let those say who know. It is possible to speak of poetry as a quality of life, as a way of looking at things, as that which redeems life from materialism or the commonplace, as that which sees beauty and truth as one. Meredith's Diana says of poetry, "Those that have souls meet their fellows there." The story is told that Margaret Fuller said to Emerson, when they were watching a famous ballet dancer, "This is poetry." Emerson's reply, "No, it is religion", is excellent as conversation and no doubt true of his own experience, but all of this is far from defining. The arts may be one spiritually, but they are many and distinct when it comes to medium, method, and their first effect on the beholder. They overlap as much and as little as the sciences do with each other; they complete each other; but criticism must save them from confusion, and must do so by means of laws that each of the several arts creates by its own activity, within the circumstances natural to it.

The most obvious circumstances of poetry's mode of expression are indicated in Lessing's phrase, "articulate tones in time." That is, poetry uses language for a medium, and thereby is separated from the arts that use some other

medium. But this does not separate poetry from prose literature. Modern writers about poetry are nearly if not entirely unanimous in making rhythm essential to poetry. The long Chapter II of Gummere's "Beginnings of Poetry" is entitled "Rhythm as the Essential Fact of Poetry." Thought is not ignored, nor music; yet poetry is neither one alone, but the two in combination, a harmony of thoughts and sounds—in other words, rhythmic language.

The problem of a more exact distinction between the rhythm that is poetry and the prose that is also rhythm cannot be dismissed in a word, but it must be left to others to work out. The object of this paper does not require that the decision shall be taken away from the readers who feel differences, or from writers who like to cross boundaries. That gives me, as a reader, the freedom to indicate my own taste in the matter. I like my writer, whether of prose or of verse, to fulfill the "expectation" which his apparent choice of form has aroused. If he writes in prose form without making thought far more prominent than rhythm, I shall not take his thought seriously.

The question of why rhythm is essential to poetry takes us back of rhythm itself, both historically and psychologically. The earliest speech may have developed under a pressure of social needs that we can hardly imagine today unless we approximate similar life conditions. Prisoners in solitary confinement might throw a light on this. Social need and social consent must also have conditioned the first poetry more than even Mr. Vachell Lindsay's audiences could suspect. Gummere tells us that in early poetry rhythm was the conventional part of it. The association with dancing and choral movements was not incidental. "Rhythm is an affair of instructive perception transformed into a social act as the expression of social consent." Even in our modern day song relieves the fatigue of marching, of raising an anchor, and of certain farm work. A child, playing with other children, easily finds rhythmic words to go with rhythmic movements; but the movements are fundamental; the crude invention of words is not. When he is alone, the child's need for the invention no longer applying, there will be very little rhythmic composition.



Poetry has changed with society; both respond to new conditions, and thought counts as a growing factor in both. We are now somewhat different men, especially on the surface, but we remain emotional. "Beneath the conscious life of feeling there exists a very low and obscure region, that of vital or organic sensibility, which is an embryonic form of *conscious* sensibility, and supports it." The modern poet must work in this field if he will win response. "The mere fact of utterance is social; however solitary his thought, a poet's utterance must voice this consent of man with man, and his emotion must fall into rhythm, the one and eternal expression of consent. This, then, is why rhythm will not be banished from poetry so long as poetry shall remain emotional utterance; for rhythm is not only sign and warrant of a social contract stronger, deeper, vaster, than any fancied by Rousseau, but it is the expression of a human sense more keen even than the fear of devils and the love of gods,—the sense and sympathy of kind."

Poetry as thought is another matter. Thought processes are used in reading poetry, and we have the testimony of Poe, Wordsworth, and others that such processes are important in making it. But we generally use the word *imagination*, rather than *thought*, to indicate the fusion of experience, mind, and feeling that is creative of poetry and of great literature generally. Imagination "is distinguished from perception by its relative freedom from the dictation of sense; it is distinguished from memory by its power to acquire—memory only retains; it is distinguished from emotion in being a force rather than a motive; from the understanding in being an assimilator rather than the mere weigher of what is set before it; from the will, because the will is but the wielder of the reins . . . It is distinguished from all these, *yet it includes them all, for it is the full functioning of the whole mind* and in the total activity drives all mental faculties to its one supreme end—the widening of the world wherein we dwell." The reader who receives what the poet offers to give must take as much as he can by the exercise of a like faculty, or rather, of like faculties working together. The reader's exercise is passive only by comparison; it must be creative to recognize the inner congruity of the elements

that the poet has fused into his work. *Kubla Khan* moves the reader towards the passive state in which Coleridge says that he was when the images of it came to him; but the great odes of Keats, Shelley, or Wordsworth, the numerous sonnets that develop a thought—any poems whose design has called for deliberate construction—show us how far poetry has moved from the primitive character of its beginnings.

To be sure, Watts-Dunton insists that “with abstractions the poet has nothing to do, save to take them and turn them into concretions; for, as artist, he . . . embodies in concrete forms that ‘universal idea,’ . . . that which is essential and elemental in nature and in man.” It is the poet’s truth *as felt*, not his logic, as such, that tells. The aim is at a literature of power, not primarily at a literature of fact knowledge. Value and fact should not be in disagreement, but they often seem so to be. Poetry is not freed from the influence of fact; departures from fact recognize what they depart from even when “the bowsprit gets mixed up with the rudder.” But the value element is what makes poetry so important.

In what kind of language, then, does “value” receive its expression? The answer in Watts-Dunton’s article on *Poetry* in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is as follows: “Absolute poetry is the concrete and artistic expression of the human mind in emotional and rhythmical language.” This concreteness of language is very striking in nearly all great poetry. In a previous part of this paper I have endeavored to show that the language which expresses reflective thinking tends away from the contexts of sense experience to the abstract; the language which poetry selects tends in the opposite direction. Ultimate reality, truth, God, whatever you wish to call it, seems to be unknowable to pure intellect. Intellect seeks to solve a problem and to know the intellectual truth about it; it is unable to know an ultimate thing, to achieve the act of essential apprehension which is almost a becoming of the thing to be so apprehended. It is thru the world of appearance, thru the sense world, that reality of being is felt, apprehended. Francis Thompson writes of Jacob’s ladder as “pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross;” he says that angels are started when you “turn a stone.” Although this

is mysticism, a great deal of poetry is akin to mysticism. Shelley hears the roar of a great wind, sees the leaves scattered before it, and comes to say like the Hindu prophet: "That art Thou!" And a woman poet of our day exclaims:

"Oh, World, I cannot hold thee close enough";

and in her "Renaissance" she becomes identified with the things which previously had been thought of. This is not abstraction but concretion. The language of knowledge achieves a kind of truth whose austerity is of profound meaning for the few who are capable of that rare emotion, intellectual feeling; the language that poetry uses must be concrete, for so truth may dwell incarnate among men. It can do so in no other way.

#### POETRY, REALITY, AND TRUTH OF FEELING

The language of abstract thinking, valuable and important as it is for its purposes, is not apt to be a language of power in general communication. Even as faith, as a live experience, grows by doing, rather than by remembering sound doctrines, so intellectual truth comes rather to one who thinks his own way to it than to one who reads about it in the abstract language of another's achievement. The concluding sentence of Mr. John Dewey's valuable book, "How we Think," reads as follows: "Genuine communication involves contagion; its name should not be taken in vain by terming communication that which provides no community of thought and purpose between the child and the race of which he is the heir."

The language of power gives this contagion, whether in the prose of William James or in the poetry of Shelley:

"And by the incantation of this verse,  
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth  
The trumpet of a prophecy!"

Shelley's "incantation," Macaulay's eloquence, William James's brilliancy in the employment of figures and illustra-



tions bring conviction. Do they bring truth? It is the duty of criticism to tell us when they do, or when they lead us and themselves astray. But nothing is more obvious than the fact that when abstract language, free from falsehood, brings us nothing, it does not bring us truth. When Jesus spoke as one having authority, it was the contagion of his personality and the appropriate force of his words that made the appeal; and it was the authority of truth which he felt within that enabled him so to be and so to speak. This consciousness of the authority of truth within gives the poet a part of his power; the communication is contagion.

But the language which the poet uses is not truth itself or reality itself. These things are first in the poet, and then in the reader. "Color can give color, line line, but the relation between words and things is not and cannot be direct. Words are not warm or luminous; they have not line or color; they are odorless. Sound and movement they have, in common with what I hear and see, and that is all. But even so, the sound and movement are not the same." Here we see that the poet's medium, language, is limited by the convention that gives it the meaning it is able to hold and to communicate. Words are only symbols; images are symbols, too, and their power lies in their ability to give more meaning than the matter of fact. "The poet's truth which is presented through illusion is also truth tinged with emotion . . . it differs fundamentally from that other aspect of truth which the scientist strives to catch and fix." The "illusion" mentioned is not, of course, untruth, but more truth, for as Mr. Lowes explains, " . . . illusion is a convention—a convention which poetry shares with the other arts, and its roots, on the one hand, are in the nature of the poetic medium itself, and on the other, in that common consent which underlies the possibility of all communication whatever."

Truth of feeling is as much to be reckoned with as truth of fact, of science, of intellect. When expressed in poetry and poetic language, its validity is recognized in the inner congruity of what is said. But correspondence between what is said and what is spoken of cannot be submitted to satisfactory objective test. I will venture to say that testing the truth of poetry is like testing the truth of a human institution: the

fact that something takes form is evidence of need; but if it endures, the further fact of permanency points towards a probability of truth in the institution or poem. The democratic test is one that involves trial and error, cries of "lo here," and "lo there," and, for many sensitive souls, disillusion and despair en route. But the marvellous thing is that so many poems and institutions last. That they last over night is proof of little; that they outlive the age that made them is a good deal. In the nature of the case, truth of feeling is an elusive thing to talk about, much less test validly. Whether it will ever come to be charted and made graphic in symbols more capable of estimation than as now in poetic language, in works of art, or in the graces of beautiful acts and lives I do not know. For the moment I incline to leave final testing on the knees of the gods, believing that the records, if they are made, will be poetical.

The principles and creed of the imagist poets, set forth by Miss Amy Lowell in her *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* and illustrated or discussed in many places, make good reading for a high school teacher of English prose. The insistence on *le mot juste*, on concreteness, on sincerity, on freedom to experiment are all admirable. They seem, however, to be negative advices, suggesting a series of *Don'ts* rather than an imperative *Do*, and those whose poetic efforts are a deliberate response to the admirable advice which Miss Lowell expresses, accomplish more as "Sturmiers und Drangers," as disciples of a revolt than as creators. To avoid being a Longfellow is no guarantee of immortality, as Mr. Alfred Noyes would probably say if he were asked. The recent campaign has caused some breaking up of the plate glass of decoration and a temporary loss of life among a few immortals like Tennyson, to whose truth of feeling, after all, we must return.

Stevenson may well say that it takes two or more to tell the truth, the teller and the ones who hear. Of those who are willing to hear the poet of true song, of true thought, and of true feeling I think especially of the young people in school, and in the paragraphs that follow I have had their attitudes and needs in mind.



## POETRY FOR THE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

When the critic is sitting in his study or in a university seminar, he may be able to look with an appreciative eye through the hundreds of volumes of poetry that make up the incomplete body of remarkable achievement during the era of individual authorship. But the teacher of adolescent students cannot expect to interest his students in all of this accumulation. It is only by means of that which is most significant and most perfect that he will induce the modern boy even to make a start, or the modern girl to become an independent reader. The poets whose verses are sonorous but not real, or are full of thought that once was significant but do not now move the imagination; or the very modern poet who appeals to a perverted or exaggerated taste, or worse still, the sentimental poet whose emotion is not authentic—these are to be avoided or, at least, not obtruded. As a teacher I have occasionally thought it fair to use my own influence directly to secure attention for masterpieces like *Lycidas* or *The Ode on the Intimations of Immortality* from pupils rather young for these mature pieces. In the main it is better not to strain the teacher's influence but to let the poets who should be able to do so speak for themselves. If reality, truth of feeling, imaginative power, rhythm, art, are there, the teacher's main duty and pleasure will be to act as host and manage the introductions. Some management is, of course, called for in the best of company, but with vital poetry as the guest of honor there should be little place for other guests that cannot please but are invited because of their reputation.

There are few anthologies of recent poetry edited for school use that contain the one hundred best lyrics of the past thirty years. Nearly half of the pages of these books are filled with verse that is second rate in its own age, and with authors who will be forgotten before they die. I am waiting for publishers to allow the collection to be made that will hardly run to more than thirty authors, British and American, and which will contain all of the very best of ten of them. I do not know of an anthology for schools in which all of the following may be found: Lindsay's *General William Booth enters into Heaven*, Rupert Brooke's *The Great Lover* and *Granchester*, Edna St.

Vincent Millay's *Renaissance*, and Walter de la Mare's *The Listeners*. No one of these poems is so difficult as poetry as the hardest selections in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*; and when their natural appeal is compared with that of certain prose commonly taught in our schools—the writings of Burke or Macauley, for instance—doubts as to their availability should vanish. Time in school is precious. There is time to study the very best, but little for the second rate.

If we are to select of the best poetry some poetical “touchstones” by which we may judge the rest, or which may serve to give the tone to our unconscious judgment, are we to choose whole poems or short passages? The construction or design in which the Greeks have set patterns for all time, we suppose, can only be seen in the completed poem. Mind as well as feeling will have its chance here; indeed, our capacity for feeling is not limited to what a concentrated line or a brilliant image can give us. It is only when the complete design of Shelley's *Skylark* or *Ode to a West Wind* is apprehended that our fuller powers of feeling, of responsive emotion are released.

Design can be very simply studied in an obvious pattern in Masefield's *Cargoes*, in Wordsworth's *Daffodils* or *She was a Phantom of Delight*, and in many sonnets from Shakespeare's time to the present; in more complicated form it may be traced and grasped in the two odes of Shelley named above, in Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, or Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*, or certain of his shorter lyrics. It is there to be found and appreciated in *Lycidas*, *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*; in Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*; or in Wordsworth's *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*, or *Ode to Duty*. My oldest pupils are of the eleventh year of school. They can get the design in the first two groups I have named, but in the third group it is not so easy for them. I read these poems also with my pupils, hoping that a few may grasp the outline, and trusting that many will find and enjoy the numerous shorter “touchstones” embedded in the structure.

Why do I select these from many equally accessible poems to hold up as touchstones of the larger size? It is because the design is sufficiently visible, with the qualification already made, and the texture throughout is of the finest. Other



reasons certainly count with me too: "high seriousness" is exemplified in most of them, and (without stressing the place of *Cargoes* in the list) values of indescribable worth are communicated by their contagion, not only to the teacher, but to many and possibly to a majority of the class group.

Of great poems that do not fully meet the requirements of design, I have found Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* too long drawn out and lacking the final note of conviction in its ending; *The Vision of Sir Launfal* is admirable for a younger class for many reasons, including the visibility of its design,—yet the design seems less to have made itself than have those of the better poems I have named; and *The Ancient Mariner* seems to lose its consistency of magic between the middle and the end, as must be with a piece that is so long and that reaches such incredible truth of representation before its middle. But *The Ancient Mariner*, like most plays of Shakespere read in school, is a storehouse of touchstones of the smaller size.

I like my pupils to make their own collections of short passages that please or move them most. It is not always safer to pass criticism on the lists made than to give an opinion on the worth of the company that a pupil keeps; but a conscientious teacher will sometimes do both. In defending my own list I may speak of rhythm, of concentration, of tone-color or suggestion, of close-packed meaning beautifully said, or of the fusion of several or all of these features. But the best defense is found in action. When others borrow from my list not to return, they take that which I hope enriches them and leaves me anything but consciously poor in spirit. I do not, of course, follow the example of Hudson Maxim, who interpolates between the others gems of his own composition, most of which compel the reader to turn back to the writer's picture and stare in wild surmise. I have no notes of what is in his list; if I made my own list complete, it could hardly fail to contain many that he quotes. In conclusion, I will submit a part of my own list of touchstones and, in the spirit of ignoring reputation, will not here add the names of the writers or of the poems quoted. I have felt it next to impossible to include much from the poetry of the present century, much as I like a good deal of it. The fusion



of rhythm, suggestion, meaning; the condensation of much in few words; the imagination that compels an answering vibration; these are what I like. Sometimes most of the force is in a phrase; again it comes from the context.

My last word is that I think my choices vindicate the judgment that the best poetry is concrete.

#### SHORTER TOUCHSTONES

Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy;

---

When I have seen the hungry ocean gain  
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore . . .

---

Hesperus entreats thy light,  
Goddess excellently bright.

---

Here are sands, ignoble things,  
Dropt from the ruined sides of kings.

---

I saw Eternity the other night,

---

Come and trip it as you go,  
On the light fantastic toe.

---

And ever, against eating cares,  
Lap me in soft Lydian airs.

---

And storied windows richly dight,  
Casting a dim, religious light.

---

Toward heaven's descent had sloped his westering wheel

---

And when they list, their lean and flashy songs  
Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw,  
The hungry sheep look up and are not fed . . .

(It is the context that gives this last line a part of its sense to me of terrific power held under a pressure. Many other lines are excluded from my list because so much context would be needed to show their force.

A separate list might well be made to show the effect of context in adding force to a line otherwise scarcely impressive.)

---

In solemn troops and sweet societies.

---

The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,  
The furrow followed free;  
We were the first that ever burst  
Into that silent sea.

---

The moving moon went up the sky,  
And nowhere did abide;  
Softly she was going up,  
And a star or two beside.

---

Hast thou a charm to stay the morning star?

---

The floating clouds their state shall lend  
To her.

---

Like a glow worm golden  
In a dell of dew.

---

Sound of vernal showers  
On the twinkling grass.

---

I arise from dreams of thee  
In the first sweet sleep of night.

---

Like the bright hair uplifted from the head  
Of some fierce Maenad.

---

A loftier Argo cleaves the main,  
Fraught with a later prize.

---

Bright Star! would I were steadfast as thou art.

---

The moving waters at their priestlike task  
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!  
No hungry generations tread thee down.

---

Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

---

Cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth.

---

Looked at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

---

Spares but the cloudy border of his base  
To the foil'd searching of mortality.

---

The moan of doves in immorial elms,  
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

---

. . . . . when unto dying eyes  
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square.

---

And drunk delight of battle with my peers,  
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.

---

. . . . . The hills,  
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—

---

O lyric love, half angel and half bird,  
And all a wonder and a wild desire,—

---

Enter these enchanted woods,  
You who dare.

---

Fills the shadows and windy places  
With lisp of leaves and ripple of rain.

---

The surge and thunder of the Odyssey.

---

I will make you brooches and toys for your delight  
Of bird-song at morning and star-shine at night.